

US Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick
Remarks at the Launch of the American-Australian Free Trade Agreement Coalition
March 19, 2003
Rayburn House Office Building

Anne's [Wexler] trying to keep a little distance from me. Because I came in and she said, "You seem a little under the weather," and I said, "Yeah, I've been in Hong Kong recently, and I picked up the flu." [laughter] Its true, [laughter] but hopefully not the wrong one.

Anne was extraordinarily kind in terms of referring to me as the chief negotiator. I'm actually kind of saved until the very end. Chief negotiator right now is Ralph Ives. And I've been interested because the Australian press, I get the clippings of this, have been talking a lot about the negotiating teams that have been meeting in Canberra this weekend. In fact, there was one report I saw come out of the Times of London that said that the United States just completed agricultural negotiations with Australia, and I thought I better send a little notice to Ralph saying, "Ralph, keep me informed." [laughter]

I really want to thank a number of you tonight, people who have put together this coalition. It's obviously a critical venture as we launch this effort to build support on both sides of the Pacific. And I would like to thank in particular RD because I know all the effort this takes, and Anne, but also Russ Wisor of Alcoa, and John Gay of Southcorp, the co-chairs of this. I also want to make a little point about the vision of some our Australian friends.

I saw Phil Scanlon as I came in here. Anne and I have known Phil since he helped create Australian-American Leadership Dialogue which had its origin actually in January 1, 1992, when Phil was with President Bush 41 on a visit to Australia on New Years Day. And they were talking about the ties between our two countries. And how inevitably some of the ties after the post-World War II period would fade as the generation moved on. And how we needed try to strengthen those relationships, and that was the origin of the Dialogue. And I think in a certain way it was the origin of what we're about here as well with the trade agreement.

But also Michael Thawley, the indefatigable Australian Ambassador, who must have been on my tail every week about trying to launch these negotiations. [laughter] And that in so many areas, I really want to say that having worked with ambassadors in prior times in the State Department and now at USTR, this is really the class of the class, and we're very fortunate to have you here.

Success ultimately depends on Congressional support, so I'm delighted we've got so many strong members of Congress. People that have helped this through thick and thin. I understand that Cal Dooley and Dave Dreier, who spoke, are going to be co-chairing an effort, and I couldn't ask for two better leaders. You've been critical for us on so many things that we do, and I really appreciate you helping us here.

I've been reading, as I've mentioned, the Australian papers as we started the negotiations this week. And not surprisingly, they're full of articles about the trade-offs of this or the other thing.

And I just want to step back for a minute and say that from my perspective its important not to lose sight of something bigger; which is that these trade agreements are fundamentally win-win ventures. Both sides gain, in terms of lower prices; in terms of becoming more competitive; in terms of the investment flows; the business links; and at the end of the day I think we're going to have an agreement that we both can be proud of in terms of not only helping our two countries, but helping our countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

I also have to mention, I smile sometimes when I read some of the Australian comments about the fact that, you know, "should we really be negotiating with such a good political and security friend?" And I just finished a negotiation with Singapore, and I will say to our Australian colleagues a little few thousand miles away, if this is reported, that the Singaporeans didn't have any hesitation about negotiating with somebody that they considered a good political and security friend, as well as economics. And I can tell you that particularly as Congress passed Trade Promotion Authority, I've had no shortage of countries coming to approach us for free trade agreements, so I would hate to disqualify Australia just because it was a good friend. [laughter]

Another point that is raised a lot is how this affects what we do in the global negotiations, and I see a number of members here from the ag committee and others, and I know this is a very important issue. But I just want to emphasise what I've seen over and over again is, the types of partnerships we create through these free trade agreements actually help us in other spheres. And Australia and the United States have been working arm and arm in terms of trying to cut subsidies and tariffs in the WTO talks. And frankly, I just think it would be madness to let a few countries in Europe or elsewhere decide that they want to stop trade negotiations; because they won't cut their subsidies, we're all supposed to pack up our bags and go home. The best way to move them is to keep moving forward.

There's no doubt that both of us will have sensitive products as we go forward with this, and I think that the key that I've seen in these negotiations is to look at this as more of a problem-solving attitude. We both have politics, we've both got economics we need to take care of, and this is where this coalition becomes very important. Because a lot of people don't recognise, in these negotiations a lot of the ideas will come from outside groups. And frankly, if we can get the sectors talking to one another on both sides of the Pacific, sometimes they can come up with ideas that we can put into the agreement. And also its very important for the support to go forward, and frankly a group like this helps us as we're dealing with the individual issues to keep our eye on the overall general goal.

I just want to close with one more word. And I just think that it is particularly appropriate tonight of all nights. And that is, I really want to have a word of thanks to Australia, and the people of Australia. Australians are very stalwart friends and allies of the United States. And you know many times, I've seen from different parts of government service, the United States frankly is asked to help a lot of countries, lots of times around the world. Sometimes overtly, sometimes its just more quietly, things that were done, and frankly there's not that many times that a country like the United States has to ask for help from others. And when we do, it matters when friends stand by us, so we thank you for that, we appreciate it.